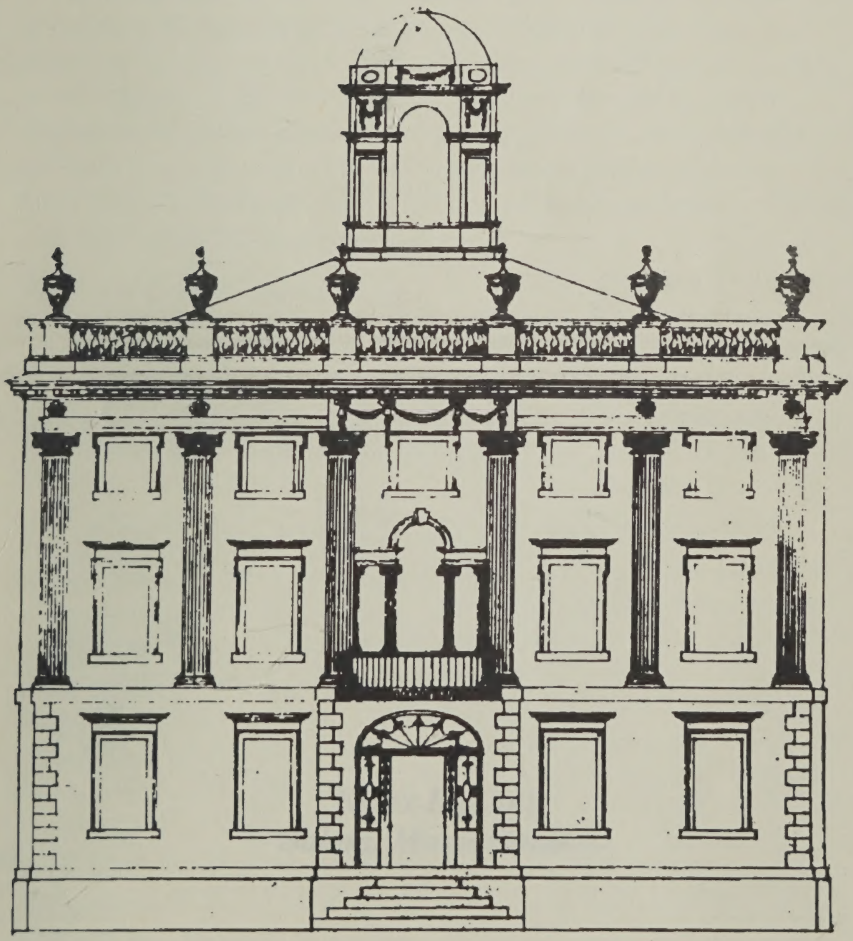
The Making of a Mansion:
Samuel McIntire and the Creation of the Derbys' Dream



The Making of a Mansion: Samuel McIntire and the Creation of the Derbys' Dream

Essex Institute
Salem, Massachusetts

The Patrons: Mr. and Mrs. Derby

Elias Hasket Derby's fortune was built on his sharp business sense and the proceeds from the voyages of a fleet of ships that traded with China, Mauritius, Madeira, Siam, Arabia, and Europe. His *Grand Turk* was the first New England ship to trade with China.

Elizabeth Crowninshield married Elias Hasket Derby on April 23, 1761. The numerous inscriptions on the backs of the drawings for the mansion, along with contemporary commentary, indicate that she was the driving force behind the building of the house.

The Derby Mansion was the fourth house owned by the Derbys. Their first house, built for them by Elias's father, Richard, was an old-fashioned one, and the couple soon purchased land with the thought of building a more up-to-date home. In 1780 they asked the young architect and builder, Samuel McIntire, to design their new house by the wharf. The Derbys soon found this house inadequate. In 1794 they purchased the William Brown house on Essex Street with the intention of remodeling it. McIntire's plan for altering the house proved insufficient, however, and in 1795 the couple decided to demolish the old house and build a new one on its site.

A Most Fashionable House

In order to be sure that their new house would be as fashionable as the best homes being built in the Boston area, the Derbys hired Boston architect Charles Bulfinch to make preliminary drawings. Although the Derbys decided not to build the house according to Bulfinch's plan, his facade (fig. 1) did influence Samuel McIntire's design for the house. McIntire produced drawings for the new house as early as July 1795 (cover), including two overall plans and three versions of the front elevation. The Derbys also ordered drawings of fashionable homes in New York and Philadelphia to serve as models for McIntire.

According to the Reverend William Bentley, Mrs. Derby played an important role in the building of the house and superintended all of the details. Her handwriting appears on the backs of many of the design drawings for the house.

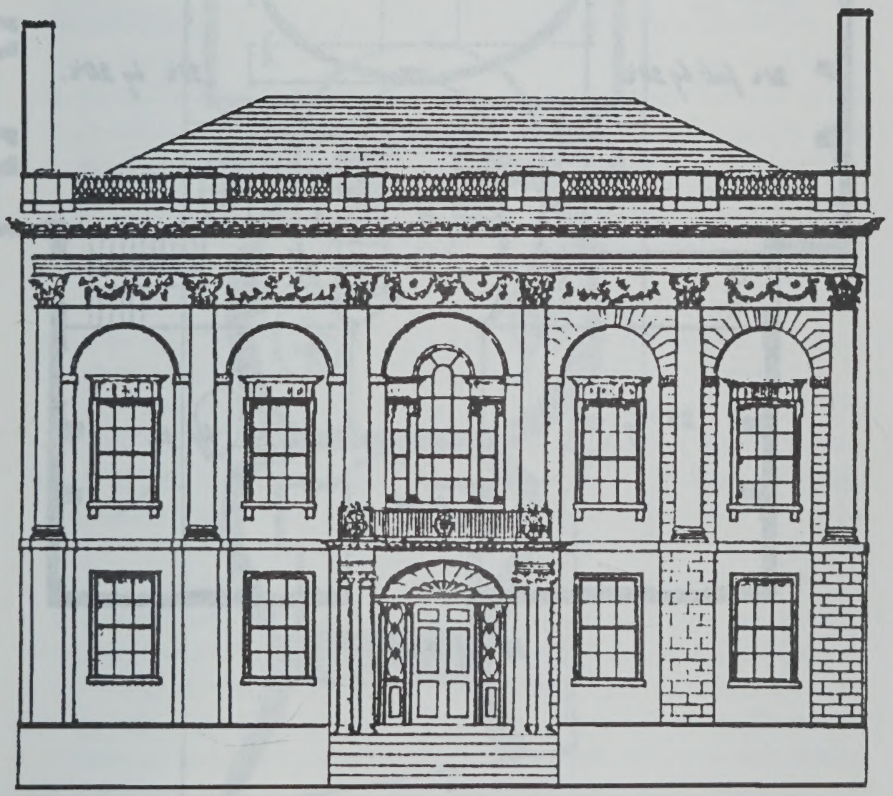


Fig. 1. Preliminary Study, Elevation, Derby Mansion, Drawn by Charles Bulfinch, Boston, ca. 1795.

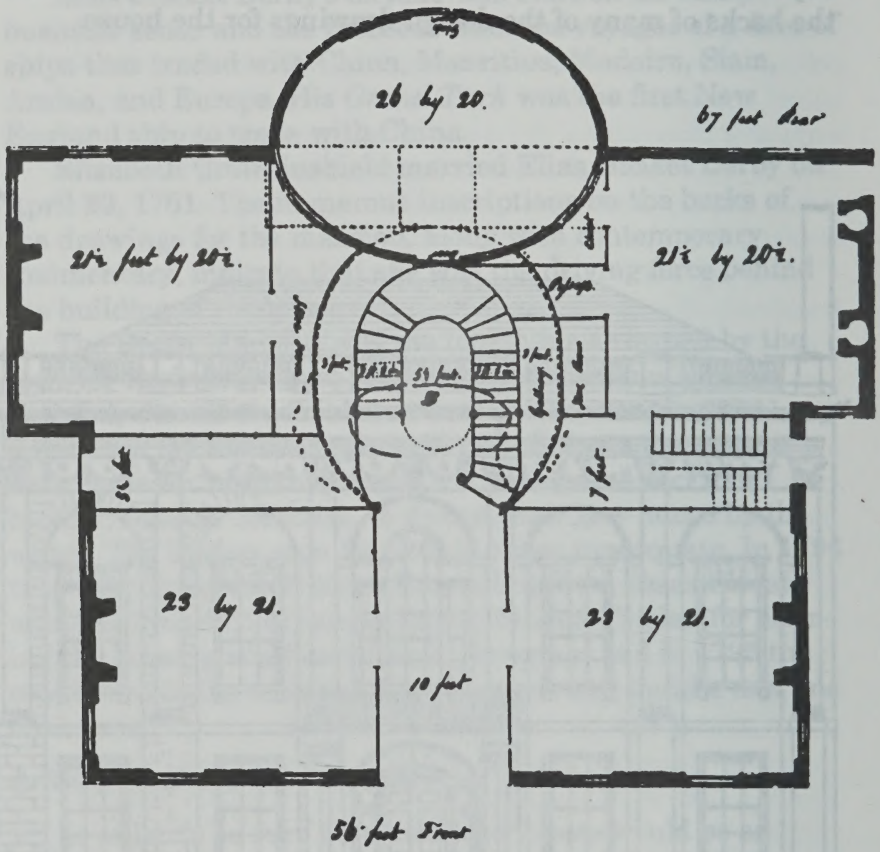


Fig. 2. First-Floor Plan, Derby Mansion, Drawn by an unknown draughtsman, ca. 1796. This was evidently the final floor plan for the house, as it is inscribed on the back, in Mrs. Derby's handwriting, "our House Plan."

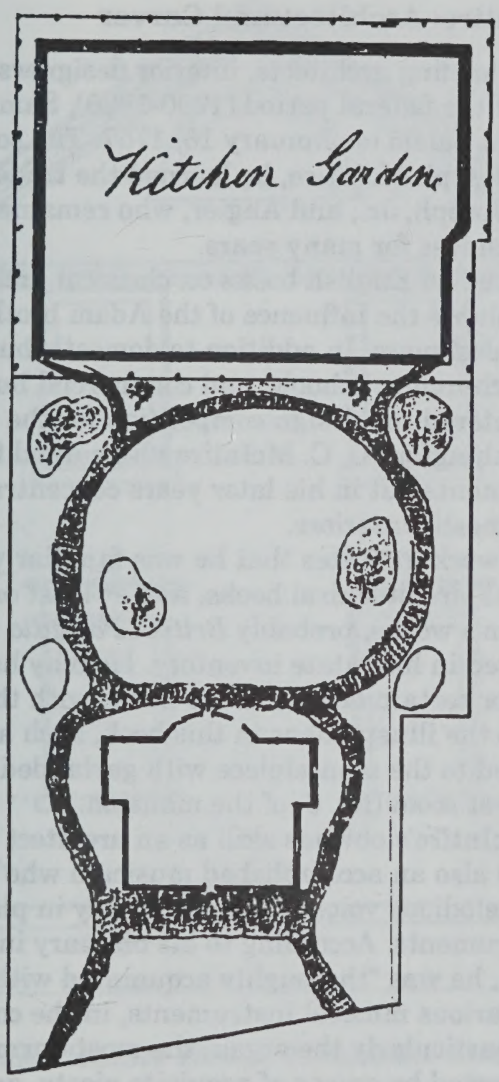


Fig. 3. Proposed Garden Plan, Derby Mansion, Drawn by an unknown designer, ca. 1798. One of three proposed designs for the garden, this plan most closely approximates contemporary descriptions of the final configuration.

Samuel McIntire: Architect and Carver

One of the leading architects, interior designers, and woodcarvers of the federal period (1790-1820), Samuel McIntire was born in Salem on January 16, 1757. The son of a housewright, Joseph McIntire, he learned the trade with his two brothers, Joseph, Jr., and Angier, who remained his partners in business for many years.

McIntire studied English books on classical architecture and his work shows the influence of the Adam brothers and other English designers. In addition to domestic buildings, he also designed churches, schools, and commercial buildings, and in 1792 entered the design competition for the federal Capitol in Washington, D. C. McIntire also carved furniture and ship ornaments but in his later years concentrated on carving for domestic interiors.

McIntire's work indicates that he was familiar with the popular English architectural books, and at least one volume of William Pain's works, probably *British Palladio* (London, 1793), was listed in his estate inventory. He may have discussed ideas for certain details in the house with the Derbys by referring to the illustrations in this book, such as plate 16 which is related to the mantelpiece with garlanded columns in the northwest room (fig. 6) of the mansion.

Besides McIntire's obvious skill as an architect and carver, he was also an accomplished musician who was said to possess a melodious voice and a proficiency in playing keyboard instruments. According to his obituary in the *Salem Gazette*, he was "thoroughly acquainted with the principles of various musical instruments, in the construction of them, particularly the organ, the most harmonious of all, he was directed by an ear of exquisite nicety, and an exactness of mechanism that ensured success."

McIntire died on February 6, 1811, having left to Salem "abundant evidences of his genius." He is buried in the Charter Street Burying Ground.

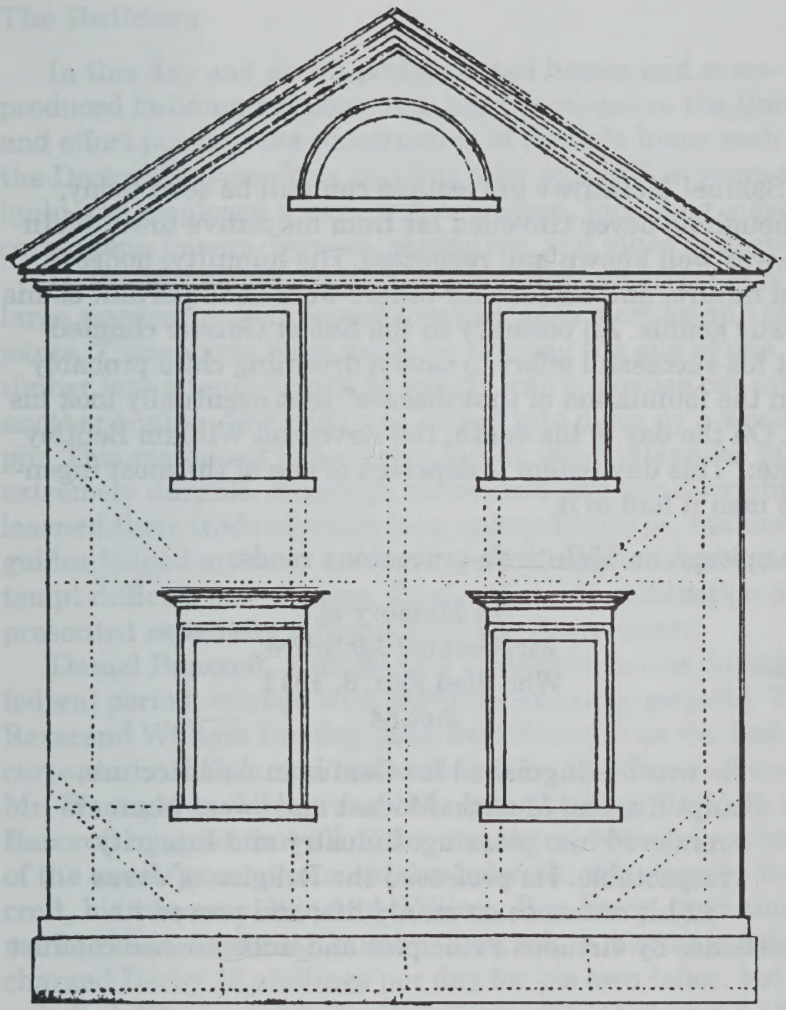


Fig. 4. Samuel McIntire House, 31 Summer Street, Salem, Drawn by Samuel McIntire, Salem, ca. 1786. McIntire's own house, though rather simple in comparison to the elegant mansions he designed for the Derbys, nevertheless had the same proportions as his more ambitious buildings. This and the side elevation of the house are notable for the inclusion of framing elements. The house was demolished about 1959.

Samuel McIntire's gravestone can still be seen today. Although he never travelled far from his native town, McIntire was well known and respected. His humility, honesty, good nature, and concern for others were as important as his artistic genius. An obituary in the *Salem Gazette* claimed that his successful effort to save a drowning child probably "laid the foundation of that disease" that eventually took his life. On the day of his death, the Reverend William Bentley wrote: "This day Salem is deprived of one of the most ingenious men it had in it."

The epitaph on McIntire's gravestone reads:

In Memory of
Mr. Samuel McIntire
Who died Feb. 6, 1811
Aet.54

He was distinguished for Genius in Architecture,
Sculpture, and Musick: Modest and sweet Manners
rendered him pleasing: Industry and Integrity
respectable: He professed the Religion of Jesus
in his entrance on manly life; and proved its
excellence by virtuous Principles and unblemished conduct

The Builders

In this day and age of prefabricated homes and mass-produced building supplies, it is hard to visualize the time and effort put into the construction of a single home such as the Derby Mansion. This building took almost five years to build and employed a variety of workmen, including masons, carpenters, joiners, carvers, plasterers, and other artisans.

In the eighteenth century, houses were constructed of large wooden timbers joined together with mortise-and-tenon joints. These joints were made by shaping the end of one timber into a tenon which fit snugly into a mortise cut into another timber. The joint was locked into place by a wooden pin. This method of joinery was highly labor-intensive, but extremely durable. Although carpenters and housewrights learned their trade through long apprenticeships, builder's guides helped artisans to learn new techniques and to attempt difficult new designs. Roof and stair construction often presented especially difficult problems for builders.

Daniel Bancroft, a prominent builder in Salem during the federal period, worked with McIntire on many projects. The Reverend William Bentley described Bancroft as the best carpenter in Salem and declared that he had "never known Mr. B's superior." Surviving bills submitted by McIntire and Bancroft suggest that all of the carpentry, with the exception of the carving and ornamental woodwork, was done by Bancroft, his two sons, Ben and William, Ben Eaton, and another worker known only as Crumby. Bancroft, a master builder, charged Derby 12 shillings per day for his own labor, but only 6 shillings per day for Ben Bancroft's labor, and 3 shillings 6 pence per day for William Bancroft's labor.

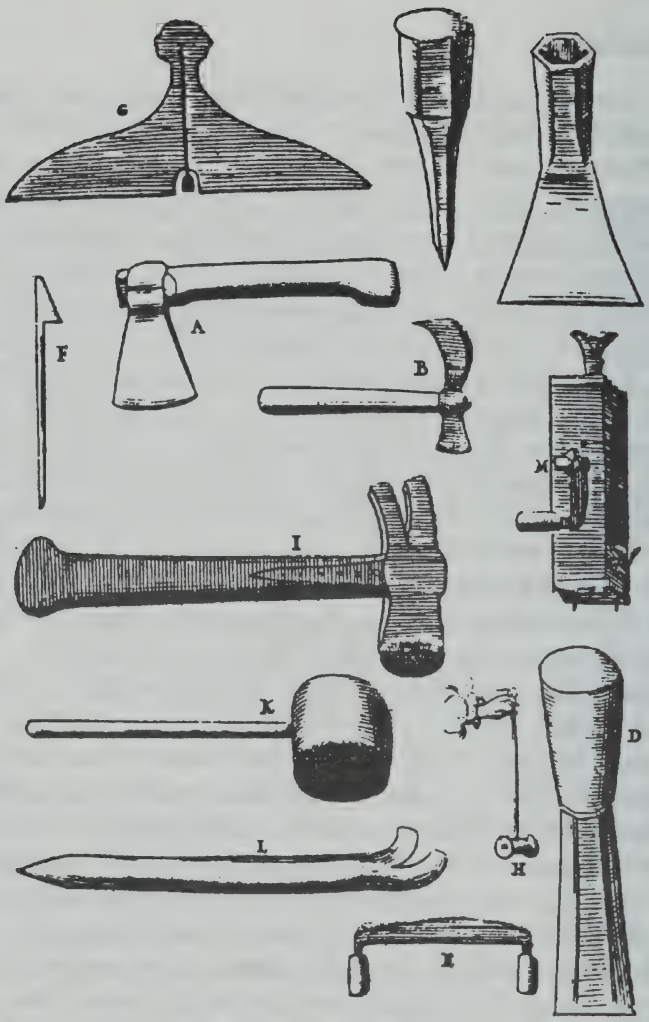


Fig. 5. Plate 8 from Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises* (London, 1703; reprint, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) provides an incomparable document of the tools used by the eighteenth-century carpenter. It shows: A, the ax; B, the adze; upper right corner, two views of the socket chisel; D, the ripping chisel; E, the drawknife; F, the hook pin; G, the level; H, the plumb line; I, the hammer; K, the commander; L, the crow bar; and M, the jack.

Surviving bills indicate that Mr. Derby was directly involved in the supervision of his workmen and that he purchased all materials, even nails, directly from the supplier. The accounts between Derby and hardware merchant Thomas Robie show the variety of hardware used in the Derby Mansion. Nails (four types), brads, hinges, screws, and latches are mentioned. Because Robie recorded who picked up the supplies, he listed many of the artisans who worked on the house, including McIntire's son and nephews and builder Daniel Bancroft and his sons.

Finishing the Interior

Although the exterior design of the Derby Mansion was impressive, it was on the interior that McIntire and his clients lavished the greatest attention. The first-floor plan (fig. 2) shows a large oval room, conceived as a grand ballroom which would overlook the Derby's garden, at the back of the house. The front drawing room, to the left of the main entry, was, from the surviving drawing (fig. 6), clearly meant to be the most lavish of the downstairs rooms. Although the uses of many of the other rooms are not clear from the floor plan, two large ovens in the chimney stack indicate that the the room at the rear, to the right of the ballroom, was meant to be the kitchen.

The oval ballroom was located on the northern side of the mansion and overlooked the garden through a pair of full-length windows. In addition to its exquisite carvings in wood, this room also had an elaborate plaster ceiling executed in stucco for the Derbys by Daniel Raynerd. The drawing for the ceiling and other details bears an unusual inscription indicating that the frieze of the room was to be taken directly from plate 61 of "Pain's small book." This has been identified as William Pain's *Practical House Carpenter*, probably the 1796 Boston edition. Many of the other details for the room resemble what McIntire recorded when he went to see the great house that Charles Bulfinch designed for Joseph Barrell in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

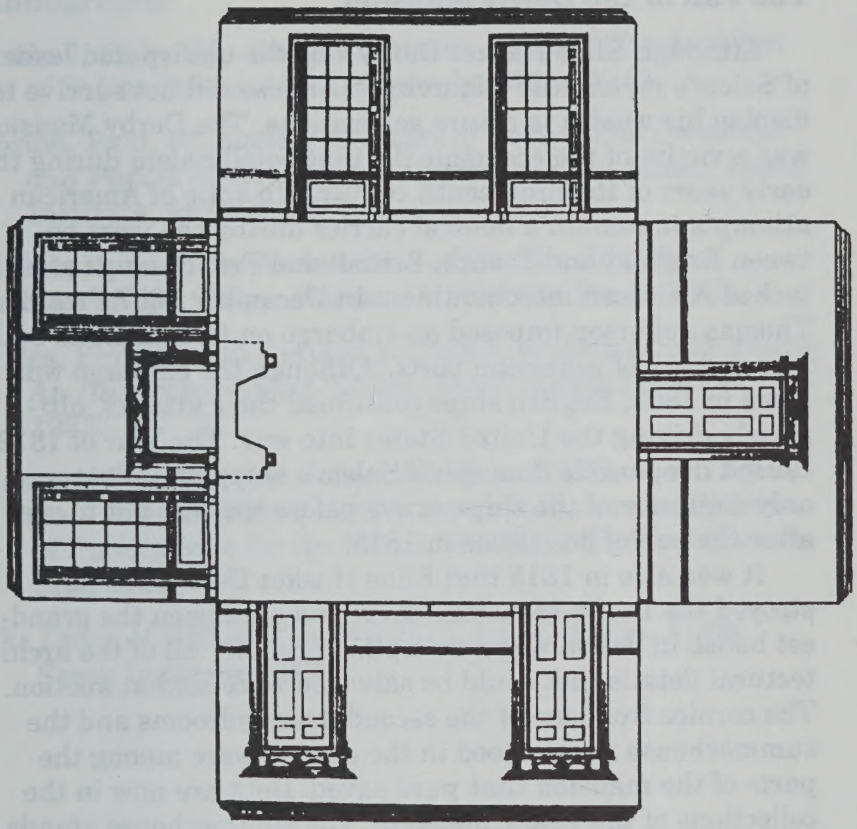


Fig. 6. Drawing Room or Northwest Room, Derby Mansion, Drawn by Samuel McIntire, ca. 1797. In this drawing, McIntire demonstrated his awareness of English architectural books. The manner of laying out the walls of a room around its plan was not common among American builders. McIntire probably learned the method from Isaac Ware's *Complete Body of Architecture* (London, 1768), a copy of which was listed in his estate inventory. The drawing is also interesting because there is a print showing a mantelpiece design pasted to it (not shown here). The original source of the print is not known.

The Fall of the Derby Mansion

Although Elias Hasket Derby was the undisputed leader of Salem's mercantile oligarchy, his house did not survive to display his wealth to future generations. The Derby Mansion was a victim of the economic ills that befell Salem during the early years of the nineteenth century. In spite of American attempts to remain a neutral carrier during the wars between England and France, British and French ships attacked American merchantmen. In December 1807 President Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo on foreign trade both into and out of American ports. Although the embargo was lifted in 1809, English ships continued their attacks, ultimately driving the United States into war. The War of 1812 caused irreparable damage to Salem's shipping industry; only a quarter of the ships active before the war put to sea after the end of hostilities in 1815.

It was also in 1815 that Elias Hasket Derby, Jr., destroyed the Derby Mansion. What had once been the grandest house in Salem was now a pile of rubble. All of the architectural details that could be salvaged were sold at auction. The cornice from one of the second floor bedrooms and the summerhouse which stood in the garden were among the parts of the mansion that were saved. Both are now in the collections of the Essex Institute. The summerhouse stands on the grounds of the Institute, in the midst of a recreation of the original garden of which it was a part. The land on which the mansion originally stood was conveyed to the city of Salem for use as a marketplace in 1815 and is now the site of the city's Old Town Hall.

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